TRANSLATED
FROM THE
JAPANESE BY
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the life-changing magic of tidying up

the Japanese art of decluttering and organizing

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TEN SPEED PRESS
BERKELEY

you don't have to travel long distances over hard terrain to get there. You can enjoy the same effect in your own home. That's pretty special, don't you think?

What to do when you can't throw something away

My criterion for deciding to keep an item is that we should feel a thrill of joy when we touch it. But it is human nature to resist throwing something away even when we know that we should. Items that we can't bring ourselves to discard even when they don't inspire joy are a real problem.

Human judgment can be divided into two broad types: intuitive and rational. When it comes to selecting what to discard, it is actually our rational judgment that causes trouble. Although intuitively we know that an object has no attraction for us, our reason raises all kinds of arguments for not discarding it, such as "I might need it later" or "It's a waste to get rid of it." These thoughts spin round and round in our mind, making it impossible to let go.

I am not claiming that it is wrong to hesitate. The inability to decide demonstrates a certain degree of attachment to a particular object. Nor can all decisions be made on intuition alone. But this is precisely why we need to

consider each object with care and not be distracted by thoughts of being wasteful.

When you come across something that's hard to discard, consider carefully why you have that specific item in the first place. When did you get it and what meaning did it have for you then? Reassess the role it plays in your life. If, for example, you have some clothes that you bought but never wear, examine them one at a time. Where did you buy that particular outfit and why? If you bought it because you thought it looked cool in the shop, it has fulfilled the function of giving you a thrill when you bought it. Then why did you never wear it? Was it because you realized that it didn't suit you when you tried it on at home? If so, and if you no longer buy clothes of the same style or color, it has fulfilled another important function—it has taught you what doesn't suit you. In fact, that particular article of clothing has already completed its role in your life, and you are free to say, "Thank you for giving me joy when I bought you," or "Thank you for teaching me what doesn't suit me," and let it go.

Every object has a different role to play. Not all clothes have come to you to be worn threadbare. It is the same with people. Not every person you meet in life will become a close friend or lover. Some you will find hard to get along with or impossible to like. But these people, too, teach you the precious lesson of who you *do* like, so that you will appreciate those special people even more.

When you come across something that you cannot part with, think carefully about its true purpose in your life. You'll be surprised at how many of the things you possess have already fulfilled their role. By acknowledging their contribution and letting them go with gratitude, you will be able to truly put the things you own, and your life, in order. In the end, all that will remain are the things that you really treasure.

To truly cherish the things that are important to you, you must first discard those that have outlived their purpose. To get rid of what you no longer need is neither wasteful nor shameful. Can you truthfully say that you treasure something buried so deeply in a closet or drawer that you have forgotten its existence? If things had feelings, they would certainly not be happy. Free them from the prison to which you have relegated them. Help them leave that deserted isle to which you have exiled them. Let them go, with gratitude. Not only you, but your things as well, will feel clear and refreshed when you are done tidying.

to have a bookshelf filled only with books that you really love. Isn't that image spellbinding? For someone who loves books, what greater happiness could there be?

Unread books

"Sometime" means "never"

The most common reason for not discarding a book is "I might read it again." Take a moment to count the number of favorite books that you have actually read more than once. How many are there? For some it may be as few as five while for some exceptional readers it may be as many as one hundred. People who reread that many, however, are usually people in specific professions, such as scholars and authors. Very rarely will you find ordinary people like me who read so many books. Let's face it. **In the end, you are going to read very few of your books again.** As with clothing, we need to stop and think about what purpose these books serve.

Books are essentially paper—sheets of paper printed with letters and bound together. Their true purpose is to be read, to convey the information to their readers. It's the information they contain that has meaning. There is no meaning in their just being on your shelves. You read books for the experience of reading. Books you have read have already been experienced and their content is inside

you, even if you don't remember. So when deciding which books to keep, forget about whether you think you'll read it again or whether you've mastered what's inside. Instead, take each book in your hand and decide whether it moves you or not. Keep only those books that will make you happy just to see them on your shelves, the ones that you really love. That includes this book, too. If you don't feel any joy when you hold it in your hand, I would rather you discard it.

What about books that you have started but not yet finished reading? Or books you bought but have not yet started? What should be done with books like these that you intend to read sometime? The Internet has made it easy to purchase books, but as a consequence, it seems to me that people have far more unread books than they once did, ranging from three to more than forty. It is not uncommon for people to purchase a book and then buy another one not long after, before they have read the first one. Unread books accumulate. The problem with books that we intend to read sometime is that they are far harder to part with than ones we have already read.

I remember one incident where I was giving a lesson to a CEO on how to clean his office. His bookshelves were filled with difficult-sounding titles that you might expect a company president to read, such as classics by authors like Drucker and Carnegie, as well as the latest best sellers. It was like walking into a bookstore. When I saw his collection, I had a sinking feeling. Sure enough,

when he began sorting them, he put one book after another on his "to keep" pile, announcing that they were still unread. By the time he finished, he still had fifty volumes and had barely made a dent in the original collection. When I asked why he kept them, he gave the classic answer from my list of most probable answers: "Because I might want to read it sometime." I'm afraid that from personal experience I can tell you right now, "sometime" never comes.

If you missed your chance to read a particular book, even if it was recommended to you or is one you have been intending to read for ages, this is your chance to let it go. You may have wanted to read it when you bought it, but if you haven't read it by now, the book's purpose was to teach you that you didn't need it. There's no need to finish reading books that you only got halfway through. Their purpose was to be read halfway. So get rid of all those unread books. It will be far better for you to read the book that really grabs you right now than one that you left to gather dust for years.

People with large book collections are almost always diligent learners. This is why it's not unusual to see many references and study guides in my clients' bookcases. Those most commonly left unread in Japan are English textbooks, practical English conversation handbooks for travelers, and useful business English phrase books. Handbooks and guides for acquiring qualifications are often incredibly diverse, ranging from

bookkeeping, real estate, and computer qualifications to aromatherapy and color coordinating. Sometimes I am amazed at the type of qualifications my clients are interested in. Many of my clients also keep their old textbooks all the way back to junior high and notebooks for practicing writing skills.

So if, like many of my clients, you have any books that fall into this category, I urge you to stop insisting that you will use them someday. Get rid of them today. Why? Because the odds are very low that you'll ever read them. Of all my clients, less than 15 percent put such books to use. When they explain why they hang on to them, their answers are all about what they intend to do "someday." "I'd like to study this someday," "I'll study it when I have a little more time," "I thought it would be useful to master English," "I wanted to study bookkeeping because I'm in management." If you haven't done what you intended to do yet, donate or recycle that book. Only by discarding it will you be able to test how passionate you are about that subject. If your feelings don't change after discarding it, then you're fine as is. If you want the book so badly after getting rid of it that you're willing to buy another copy, then buy one—and this time read and study it.

Books to keep

Those that belong in the hall of fame

I now keep my collection of books to about thirty volumes at any one time, but in the past, I found it very hard to discard books because I love them. The first time I sorted through my library using the yardstick of whether or not they gave me joy, I had about a hundred volumes left in my bookcase. Although this is not excessive compared to the average, I felt that I could still reduce. One day I decided to take a closer look at what I had. I started with books that I considered taboo to discard. In my case, first on the list was *Alice in Wonderland*, which I have read repeatedly since grade one. Books like this, which fall into one's personal Book Hall of Fame, are simple to identify. Next, I looked at books that inspired pleasure but didn't quite make it into the Hall of Fame. As time passes the content of this category naturally changes, but these books are the ones I definitely want to keep right now. At that time, one of these was *The Art of Discarding*, which first opened my eyes to tidying, although I no longer have it. Books that provide this degree of pleasure are also fine to keep.

The most difficult ones are those that give you moderate pleasure—those with words and phrases that moved your heart and that you might want to read again. These are the hardest to discard. Although I felt no pressure to

get rid of them, I could not overlook the fact that they only gave me moderate pleasure, particularly not when I was pursuing perfection in the field of tidying. I began to search for a way to let them go without regret and eventually hit upon what I called the "bulk reduction method." Realizing that what I really wanted to keep was not the book but certain information or specific words it contained, I decided that if I kept only what was necessary, I should be able to part with the rest.

My idea was to copy the sentences that inspired me into a notebook. Over time, I thought, this would become a personal collection of my favorite words of wisdom. It might be fun to read it over in the future and trace the path my interests had led me. With great excitement, I pulled out a notebook I liked and launched my project. I began by underlining the places I wanted to copy. Then I wrote the title in my notebook and began transcribing. Once I started, however, I realized that this process was far too much work. It takes time to transcribe and if I was going to be able to read those words in the future, my handwriting had to be neat. To copy ten quotations from a single book would take at least half an hour, and that was a low estimate. The thought of doing this for forty books made me dizzy.

My next plan was to use a copy machine. I would copy the sections I wanted to keep and cut and paste them into the notebook. This, I thought, should be much quicker and easier. But when I tried it, it was even more

work. I finally decided to rip the relevant page out of the book. Pasting pages into a notebook was also a pain, so I simplified the process by slipping them into a file instead. This only took five minutes per book and I managed to get rid of forty books and keep the words that I liked. I was extremely pleased with the results. Two years after launching this "bulk reduction method," I had a sudden flash of realization. I had never once looked at the file I created. All that effort had just been to ease my own conscience.

Recently, I have noticed that having fewer books actually increases the impact of the information I read. I recognize necessary information much more easily. Many of my clients, particularly those who have disposed of a substantial number of books and papers, have also mentioned this. For books, timing is everything. **The moment you first encounter a particular book is the right time to read it.** To avoid missing that moment, I recommend that you keep your collection small.

Sorting papers

Rule of thumb—discard everything

Once you've finished organizing your books, it's time to move on to your papers. For example, the letter holder bursting with envelopes that hangs on your wall; the

flood of information. The words become static that fills the air. From my own experience, the storage spaces of homes that feel "noisy" even though they look very neat on the surface usually are overflowing with unnecessary information. The neater the house and the more sparse its furnishings, the louder this information feels. So start by removing the product seals from your storage containers. This is absolutely essential, just as you remove the tags from new clothes to welcome them as your personal belongings. Tear the printed film off packages that you don't want to see, such as deodorizers and detergents. Spaces that are out of sight are still part of your house. **By eliminating excess visual information that doesn't inspire joy, you can make your space much more peaceful and comfortable.** The difference this makes is so amazing it would be a waste not to try it.

Appreciate your possessions and gain strong allies

One of the homework assignments I give my clients is to **appreciate their belongings.** For example, I urge them to try saying, "Thank you for keeping me warm all day," when they hang up their clothes after returning home. Or, when removing their accessories, I suggest they say, "Thank you for making me beautiful," and when putting

their bag in the closet, to say, "It's thanks to you that I got so much work done today." Express your appreciation to every item that supported you during the day. If you find this hard to do daily, then at least do it whenever you can.

I began to treat my belongings as if they were alive when I was a high school student. I had my own cell phone. Although the screen was still monochrome, I loved the compact design and pale blue color. I was not an addicted user, but I liked my phone so much that I broke the school rules and slipped it into the pocket of my school uniform every day. I would take it out occasionally to admire it and smile to myself. Technology progressed and everyone was getting cell phones with color screens. I hung on to my outdated model as long as I could, but finally it had become too scratched and worn, and I had to replace it. When I got my new cell phone, I hit upon the idea of texting my old phone. It was my first replacement and I was probably feeling quite excited. After thinking for a moment, I typed the simple message "Thank you for everything" and added a heart symbol. Then I pressed SEND. My old phone pinged immediately and I checked my texts. Of course it was the message I had just sent. "Great. My message reached you. I really wanted to say thanks for all you have done," I said to my old phone. Then I closed it with a click.

A few minutes later, I opened my old phone and was surprised to find that the screen was blank. No matter which button I pressed, the screen did not respond. My

cell phone, which had never broken since the day I first got it, had gone dead after receiving my message. It never worked again, as if the phone, realizing that its job was done, had resigned from its post of its own accord.

Of course, I know some people find it hard to believe that inanimate objects respond to human emotion, and it could indeed just have been coincidence. Still, we often hear about athletes who take loving care of their sports gear, treating it almost as if it were sacred. I think the athletes instinctively sense the power of these objects. If we treated all things we use in our daily life, whether it is our computer, our handbag, or our pens and pencils, with the same care that athletes give to their equipment, we could greatly increase the number of dependable "supporters" in our lives. The act of possessing is a very natural part of our daily life, not something reserved for some special match or contest.

Even if we remain unaware of it, our belongings really work hard for us, carrying out their respective roles each day to support our lives. Just as we like to come home and relax after a day's work, our things breathe a sigh of relief when they return to where they belong. Have you ever thought about what it would be like to have no fixed address? Our lives would be very uncertain. It is precisely because we have a home to return to that we can go out to work, to shop, or to interact with others. The same is true for our belongings. It is important for them to have that same reassurance that there is a place for them to return to. You can tell the difference. Possessions that have a

place where they belong and to which they are returned each day for a rest are more vibrant.

Once my clients have learned to treat their clothes with respect, they always tell me, "My clothes last longer. My sweaters don't pill as easily, and I don't spill things on them as much either." This suggests that caring for your possessions is the best way to motivate them to support you, their owner. When you treat your belongings well, they will always respond in kind. For this reason, I take time to ask myself occasionally whether the storage space I've set aside for them will make them happy. Storage, after all, is the sacred act of choosing a home for my belongings.

decision-making skills. Isn't it a waste to squander the opportunity to develop this capacity by saving things? When I visit my clients' homes, I never throw anything away. I always leave the final decision up to them. If I chose what to discard for them, there would be no point in tidying. It is by putting one's own house in order that one's mind-set is changed.

Do you greet your house?

The first thing I do when I visit a client's home is to greet their house. I kneel formally on the floor in the center of the house and address the house in my mind. After giving a brief self-introduction, including my name, address, and occupation, I ask for help in creating a space where the family can enjoy a happier life. Then I bow. It is a silent ritual that only takes about two minutes, but it does elicit some strange looks from my clients.

I began this custom quite naturally based on the etiquette of worshipping at Shinto shrines. I don't remember exactly when I started doing it, but I believe I was inspired to do so because the tense expectancy in the air when a client opens the door resembles the atmosphere when one passes under a shrine gate and enters the sacred precincts. You may think that this ritual could only have a placebo effect, but I have noticed a real difference in the speed with which tidying occurs when I perform it.

Incidentally, I don't wear sweats or work clothes when I tidy. Instead, I usually wear a dress and blazer. Although occasionally I don an apron, my priority is on design over practicality. Some clients are surprised and worry that I might ruin my clothes, but I have no trouble moving furniture, climbing onto kitchen counters, and doing the other active work involved in tidying while dressed up. This is my way of showing respect for the house and its contents. **I believe that tidying is a celebration, a special send-off for those things that will be departing from the house, and therefore I dress accordingly.** I am confident that when I show respect by the clothes I choose to wear and begin the work of tidying by greeting the house, it will in turn be happy to tell me what the family no longer needs and where to put the things remaining so that the family can be comfortable and happy in this space. This attitude speeds up decision making at the storage stage and eliminates doubt from the entire tidying process so that everything flows more smoothly.

Perhaps you don't believe that you could do this. Perhaps you think you have to be a professional like me to hear what the house has to say. In fact, however, the owners understand their possessions and their house the best. As we progress through the lessons, my clients begin to see clearly what they need to discard and where things naturally belong, and the tidying work proceeds smoothly and speedily. There is one fail-proof strategy to quickly

hone your sense of what you need and where things belong: greet your house every time you come home. This is the first homework assignment I give my clients at my private lessons. Just as you would greet your family or your pet, say, "Hello! I'm home," to your house when you return. If you forget when you walk in the door, then later, when you remember, say, "Thank you for giving me shelter." If you feel shy or embarrassed to say these things out loud, it is fine to say them silently in your mind.

If you do this repeatedly, you will start to feel your house respond when you come home. You will sense its pleasure passing through like a gentle breeze. Then you will gradually be able to feel where it would like you to tidy and where it would like you to put things. Carry on a dialogue with your home while tidying. I know this sounds totally impractical and fantastic, but if you ignore this step, you will find that the job goes less smoothly.

In essence, tidying ought to be the act of restoring balance among people, their possessions, and the house they live in. Conventional approaches to tidying, however, tend to focus solely on the relationship between people and their belongings and do not pay attention to their dwelling. I, however, am very conscious of the important role the house plays, because whenever I visit a client's home I can feel how much it cherishes its inhabitants. It is always there, waiting for my clients to return and standing ready to shelter and protect them. No matter how exhausted they are after a long day's work, it is there to

refresh and heal them. When they don't feel like working and wander around the house in their birthday suit, the home accepts them just as they are. You won't find anyone more generous or welcoming than this. Tidying is our opportunity to express our appreciation to our home for all it does for us.

To test my theory, try putting your house in order from the perspective of what would make it happy. You will be surprised at how smoothly the decision-making process goes.

Your possessions want to help you

I have spent more than half my life thinking about tidying. I visit people's homes every day and spend time confronting their possessions. I do not think there is any other profession in which I would be able to see everything a person owns or examine the contents of closets and drawers, just as they are. Although I have visited many homes, naturally no one's possessions or way of organizing is identical. Yet all these possessions share one thing in common. Think about why you have the things you do. If you answer, "Because I chose them," "Because I need them," or "Because of a variety of coincidences," all of these responses would be correct. But without exception, all the things you own share the desire to be of use to you. I can say this with certainty because I

have examined very carefully hundreds of thousands of possessions in my career as a tidying consultant.

When examined carefully, the fate that links us to the things we own is quite amazing. Take just one shirt, for example. Even if it was mass-produced in a factory, that particular shirt that you bought and brought home on that particular day is unique to you. The destiny that led us to each one of our possessions is just as precious and sacred as the destiny that connected us with the people in our lives. There is a reason why each one of your belongings came to you. When I share this perspective, some people say, "I neglected this outfit so long it's all wrinkled. It must be pretty indignant with me," or "If I don't use it, it will curse me." But from my own experience, I have never encountered any possession that reproached its owner. These thoughts stem from the owner's sense of guilt, not from the person's belongings. Then what do the things in our homes that don't spark joy actually feel? I think they simply want to leave. Lying forgotten in your closet, they know better than anyone else that they are not bringing joy to you now.

Everything you own wants to be of use to you. Even if you throw it away or burn it, it will only leave behind the energy of wanting to be of service. Freed from its physical form, it will move about your world as energy, letting other things know that you are a special person, and come back to you as the thing that will be of most use to who you are now, the thing that will bring you the most happiness.

A piece of clothing might come back as a new and beautiful outfit, or it may reappear as information or a new connection. I promise you: whatever you let go will come back in exactly the same amount, but only when it feels the desire to return to you. For this reason, when you part with something, don't sigh and say, "Oh, I never used this," or "Sorry I never got around to using you." Instead, send it off joyfully with words like, "Thank you for finding me," or "Have a good journey. See you again soon!"

Get rid of those things that no longer spark joy. **Make your parting a ceremony to launch them on a new journey.** Celebrate this occasion with them. I truly believe that our possessions are even happier and more vibrant when we let them go than when we first get them.

Your living space affects your body

Once the process of tidying is under way, many of my clients remark that they have lost weight or that they have firmed up their tummies. **It's a very strange phenomenon, but when we reduce what we own and essentially "detox" our house, it has a detox effect on our bodies as well.**

When we discard everything in one go, which sometimes means disposing of forty garbage bags of stuff in one day, our bodies may respond in a way that resembles a short fast. We may get a bout of diarrhea or break out in pimples. There is nothing wrong with this. Our bodies are